

# Counseling: An Ignored Tool?

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**H**OW MANY TIMES has a boss counseled you? That is, how many times have you had a boss sit you down and discuss your strengths and weaknesses? How many times—short of your Officer Evaluation Report (OER)—has a boss identified for you what he considers to be your strengths and weaknesses? If your boss did take time to talk with you about your strengths and weaknesses, did you both write a developmental action plan (DAP) to sustain your strengths and improve your weaknesses? Did you walk out of his office with a road map or did you just walk out and have to make one up by yourself? If your boss did design a DAP for you to follow, did he meet with you later to monitor your progress? Did he take a long-term view of your career and discuss your future?

Sadly, for an institution that focuses and depends so much on people, the answer to these questions in our Army is usually “never” or “seldom.” In our arsenal of tools to improve people and units, counseling is an often-ignored force multiplier. Publication of the 1999 US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, specifically Appendix C, “Leadership Development Review and Developmental Counseling,” is the Army’s attempt to correct this individual and collective failure to tap into the power of counseling.

Counseling is cheap—it doesn’t cost a dime—it takes less time than you think. Counseling substantially builds trust between the leader and subordinate, translating immediately to more focused leaders and more effective units. In short, counseling pays dividends.

You may remember when the Army transitioned from its old Inspector General inspections to the Command Inspection programs. The old inspections were directive and often extremely harsh. Inspectors knew what they were looking for, the checklists provided detailed instruction and inspec-

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tors never deviated from the checklists. Woe be to the unit or commander who had not followed the checklist to the letter.

More recent inspection programs are friendlier, less threatening and focus on educating and developing. They are better characterized as *assistance visits*—the inspectors are there to help units in improving specific areas within their commands. This analogy, with the difference in focus between old and new inspections, works with developmental counseling too. Developmental counseling sounds new. People may be uncomfortable with it now, but as the Army embraces the concept, subordinates will realize that their leaders are counseling them so they can become or remain successful team members, contributing to its mission, not just “checking the block.”

The purpose of counseling is to make subordinates more effective as leaders and as members of an organization or unit—“the team.” Counseling makes those counseled more involved, more



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committed and more responsible for their own personal and professional development. Those properly counseled become better individual and collective team members. Counseling helps subordinates succeed because leaders can chart a focused plan for a soldier's personal and professional growth, both near term and long range.

What effective counseling is *not* is what we think of when we hear a comment like, "Don't worry, I had a little counseling session with Private Blank, and he won't be doing that again!" Effective counseling is *not* directive, one-way communication. A leader preaching, pontificating or storytelling to his subordinates is not counseling—that is relating folklore. While there may be a time and place for such activity, it is not what we mean when we discuss our new leadership doctrine and developmental counseling.

Counseling is not communication that results in temporary changes in a subordinate's behavior: "Sergeant Jones, make sure your squad does its precombat inspection (PCI) next time." That is merely informing a subordinate to take corrective action. True counseling results in creation of a plan of action jointly, by the leader and the subordinate, with the objective to make the subordinate better able to perform his job. To continue with the example, true developmental counseling takes the next step—creating a plan of action. "Sergeant Jones, your squad had a problem with PCIs. I want to make sure you understand the importance of com-

bat checks and how a noncommissioned officer (NCO) conducts a thorough precombat inspection. Let's take time next Wednesday to go over this together. Bring your *Soldier's Manual* and we'll walk through a good PCI."

Developmental counseling is not negative and it should not be done only at evaluation time or after poor performance. Developmental counseling has to be periodic, regular and routine, with the end goal of improving or maintaining good performance of the soldier being counseled. True developmental counseling should be positive in tone. It should leave the soldier feeling he has a good idea of what his boss wants him to accomplish, both individually and collectively for his "team."

Appendix C, in FM 22-100 spells out four qualities leaders must have as counselors:

- *Respect for subordinates.* Leaders must have faith in their subordinates' abilities and in their capacity to develop.
- *Self-awareness and cultural awareness.* Leaders must be aware of their own values and aware of the similarities and differences of those of different cultural backgrounds and how these factors influence values, perspectives and actions.
- *Empathy.* Leaders must be understanding of and sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of their subordinates.
- *Credibility.* Leaders must have a straightforward style with their subordinates, fostering a mutual trust.

For more information about counseling, visit Appendix C, FM 22-100, at: [www.counseling.army.mil](http://www.counseling.army.mil).

Without these four qualities, leaders cannot succeed as counselors. Moreover, without these qualities, I doubt if any individual could succeed as a leader. A challenging aspect of counseling is selecting the proper approach to a specific situation. Generally, skills of successful counselors include:

- *Active listening*—give full attention to subordinates; listening to their words *and* the way they are spoken. Notice voice, tone, eye contact, facial expression and appearance. Transmit an understanding of message through responding.
- *Responding appropriately*—verbally and nonverbally. Use eye contact and gestures. Check understanding without talking too much; summarize, interpret and question.
- *Questioning Skills*—serve as a way to obtain valuable information and to get subordinates to think. The majority of questions should be open-ended and structured so that the information received relates to the session at hand. Well-posed

questions may help to verify understanding, encourage further explanation or guide the subordinate through the stages of the counseling session.

Counselors should use the four-step method below when counseling soldiers or subordinate leaders:

- Observe the behavior. See what the soldier or leader is doing. Go where he works. See firsthand what he does. Use manifestations of behavior if you cannot witness the event yourself. What are “manifestations of behavior?” They are the things you can measure or get objective feedback on if you are not there—physical training scores; inspection results; gunnery scores; preparation for overseas movement results; and training after-action reviews (AARs). There are ample possibilities specific to your unit or assignment.

- Assess the behavior. Was it above standard? Where did it not meet the standard? Of course, this implies that you as a leader know what the standards are or should be. Evaluate subordinate’s behavior as it corresponds to one of the Army’s 23 leader dimensions—the seven Army values and the 16 attributes required of leaders. Assess how what you observed either exceeded, met or needs improvement among these leader dimensions. The leader dimensions will help you be more explicit in your feedback to those you are counseling.

- Coach the individual you are counseling. Tell him from your experience, where he can make specific improvements to his skills or behaviors: “You know, Lieutenant Smith, when I was a platoon leader, we had a crew that could not do gunnery. But one day the platoon sergeant and I sat down with the whole crew and went step by step through the crew drill with them. Once that crew understood why they were performing the steps in a certain sequence, they became one of the best squads in the platoon.” Coaching is where you can provide your experience and skills to those you are counseling.

- Conduct a developmental counseling session. Solicit from the individual you are counseling what he needs to fix or do to maintain his current performance level, outlining what you both will do to ei-

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ther maintain the good or repair the bad. Then make a commitment on when and where to meet again to review your joint plan.

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When more soldiers want to talk to you, you know that you have been effective. Developmental counseling helps leaders “build” better subordinates. Those counseled focus more clearly on their own professional growth. They can contribute more effectively to the team’s success.

Our Army embedded preventative maintenance checks and services into our collective psyche in the early 1970s. We developed our training edge in the 1980s by institutionalizing the AAR. We standardized our approach to risk assessment in the early 1990s. Now, on the threshold of the new century, we can take great steps forward in personnel readiness by making developmental counseling an integral part of how we manage our people. Our soldiers want it and deserve it—as leaders, we owe it to them. Let’s get started. **MR**

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